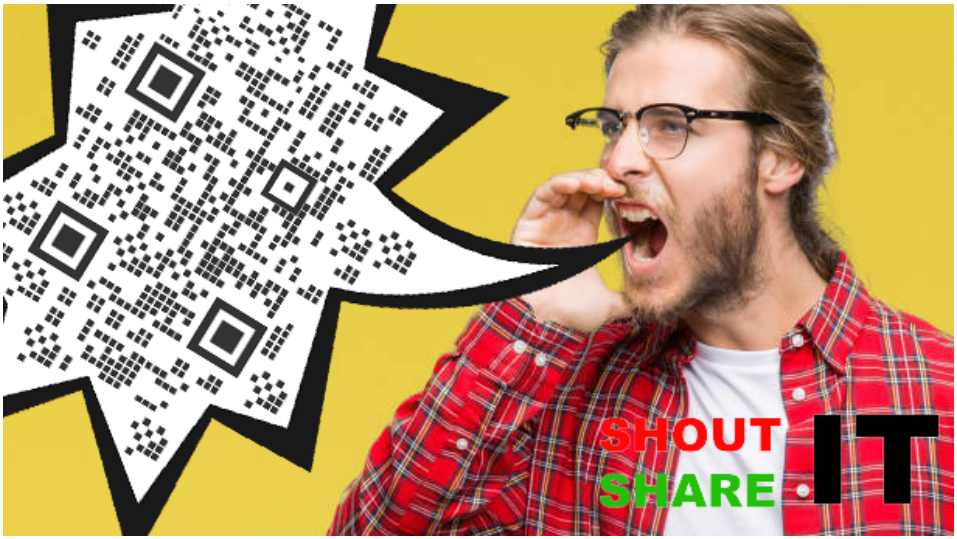
BEACON 23

TWO: PET ROCKS

HUGH HOWEY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Annotation

It’s been a week since the cargo ship was lost on my watch. A week with very little sleep and not much appetite. Now the bio scanner is picking up some sign of life out there in the wreckage, and it’s my duty to go see what it is. Maybe I’m not as alone out here as I thought. And maybe I don’t want to be.

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Beacon 23
PART TWO: PET ROCKS
by Hugh Howey

• 1 •

When a trans-orbital cargo ship traveling twenty times the speed of light bumps into large, stationary rocks, it makes quite a scene.

I can attest.

I am witness.

According to the labcoats at NASA, I might be the only soul to see such a spectacle with his own eyes and live to tell the tale. Besides the asshole pirates who caused the ruckus in the first place, I have to remind them.

Up in the business end of my beacon, where the gravity wave broadcaster helps ships avoid my asteroid field, there's a photo of an old man standing in front of a lighthouse as it gets battered by heavy seas. Some former beacon resident must've seen an affinity between our two occupations. And now I find myself wondering if any of those old lighthouse keepers felt this empty, gnawing, hungry, depressed sensation after a ship was lost on their rocks. I wonder if they felt this helplessness, this dread, this sense of duty derelictioned—if that's even a word. Did they watch for weeks as planks of wood and tangles of rope washed up on their shores? Did they feel as though they didn't do quite enough? That the blood out there was on their hands?

I hope not. I wouldn't wish this on anyone, much as I crave the company, much as I wish I didn't feel so alone. It's a selfish craving, desiring a partner in misery. The brotherhood of war was a lot like this. You didn't want your squadmates to be there, suffering with you, but you couldn't have made it through without them. You wanted them home as badly as they wanted to be home, but only if you all got to go at once. I'm pretty sure every one of us was thinking: *Don't leave a man behind—especially not me*.

It's been seven days since the wreck, and I haven't slept much. I have no appetite. I keep telling myself it was only six dead, which would've been a great day along the front, but maybe it's the near-miss of the passenger liner that keeps me up at night and has me skipping my morning bowl of protein mix. Even though the passenger ship passed by without incident, I can somehow see five thousand bodies tumbling out there among the rocks. I can hear their families weeping. None of them know how close they came. But I do. I get the shakes when I think about it. I concentrate instead on the four men and two women who *did* die out there, and I run everything over and over in my head, wondering what I could've done differently.

NASA had some choice words, of course. No more trading with ships passing through the system. I am officially on quarantine. Protocols across all the beacons are being affected because of my

dumb ass. I remember a morning in flight school when the entire platoon had to run thirty klicks because of some wisecrack I made. I'm still making trouble for everyone else. Before I can stop it, my mind jerks back to my last day in the war, with my squad dead, three platoons hunkered down, oblivion approaching…

I clamp down on those memories. I embrace fresher torments. But my shrink warned me about this, how anger and depression get misassigned, and how if I don't work through shit it'll keep resurfacing in ways I don't expect. Maybe it's not the six dead or the five thousand saved that have me feeling this way. And maybe taking this job was the worst way possible to wrestle down my demons. They've got me trapped here, in my beacon. And vastly outnumbered.

If my private torments aren't going away anytime soon, at least the cosmos has a short memory. The armada of news ships with their channel stations painted across their hulls has come and gone. As well as the private yacht rubberneckers and souvenir-seekers and scavengers. The busted cargo ship was like a spilled can of soda. A swarm of ants and bees came, and now are gone.

NASA, bless them, can only concentrate on the fact that my rebooting the beacon erased the last few hours of recordings from the scanners, and so we have no vid of the disaster. They say I missed a prime opportunity to record just what happens when a ship collides with a meteor field in hyperspace. I might've saved five thousand lives, but the way my bosses are talking, it was too cheap an exchange for what might've been learned.

Funny, I thought I was getting away from such hard calculations when I left the army. I suppose half a klick won on some alien rock has a price about the same as a paragraph gained in the storehouse of human knowledge. Everyone's gonna die anyway, right? Well, someone should explain to these clowns that borders aren't forever either, and neither are their theories. It all goes. They can damn me all they like for choosing to save lives. Guess we each have our own stupid priorities.

•••

I sit with my back to the restored GWB to calm these thoughts. Whatever the dome does to the local gravity field to warn ships of danger, it does something just as useful to my head. I worry less when I'm up here. It's like two fingers of whiskey that keeps tumbling through my veins, never stopping, never subsiding, never becoming too much.

Outside the porthole in front of me, a massive field of debris

catches the starlight. The only NASA scanner that remembers what happened is my imperfect and bewildered brain, and it replays the impact in a loop. I see a flash of light, asteroids as big as moons bursting into clouds of bright powder, cargo that survived the impact scattering, the rear half of the massive ship popping out of hyperspace and exploding into countless pieces, and a vortex of bouncing mass and momentum and splintering steel and rock.

I described it all to the labcoats as best I could. I nodded at the animations they came up with. I watched them lumber around my beacon, going through all the panels and crannies, sniffing out the sabotaging little vermin that tormented me with their squeaks and clicks, everyone lecturing me on the new quarantine protocols. As shrapnel and rocks clinked and clanged off the beacon like hailstones, and men smarter than me frowned at whatever they were calculating in their noggins, I wondered if they'd send me home like the army had. But they packed up and went zipping back to Houston, leaving me in this funk.

The debris has kept on striking the beacon since they left, though the patter is becoming more sparse. Ignoring the labcoats' reassurances, I've taken to sleeping in the lifeboat, just in case. I retrieved the walk suit from the airlock—the thing smelling of a decade of sweat and storage—and I wear it all the time now. I sleep with my helmet right in front of me. The first two nights, I slept with the helmet on, the visor closed, my exhalations fogging my vision.

The sight of myself in the mirrored visor isn't pretty, I have to admit. I look like a dead man. Gaunt. Unshaven. Older than my thirty-five years. But I keep the image of myself close at hand, my helmet within reach, just like in my army days. I long ago learned to embrace the illusion that a thin veneer over my skull might save me. No rock to hide under, so this will have to do.

In the middle of the night last night, a whizzing hunk-of-something punched a neat hole in the upper solar array, waking me up and sending me scrambling for a damage assessment. An awful clatter followed as a small storm of debris peppered the hull—but the beacon never lost integrity. I've been keeping an eye on the atmo gauges ever since. The alarms should sound if something goes amiss, but I keep wondering what happens if the alarms are the first things damaged? Or if I'd even hear the alarms in the lifeboat at night. This is like living in the trenches again, just a different kind of bombardment. But there's that nervous, anxious energy every second, that knowledge that your life could end before you have enough time to call out for your momma. Just a whistle, and then a cloud of red. Or in this case, a sharp bang, a hiss of vacuum equalizing, and then a cold, asphyxiating death.

To keep my mind off things, I go over the scans I managed to get of the aftermath. I caught a lot of the debris expanding and ricocheting, and I got great vid of the two scavenger ships that caused the wreck in the first place. Grabbed their signatures and hull IDs before they could zip off into the FTL yonder. I'm sure the sigs are bogus, but it made me feel useful. And with the full zoom on the viz scanner, I can sit and watch the little bastards in their spacesuits as they sift through the drifting cargo, getting what they can, stuffing their holds, then leaving.

Somewhere out there, six crewmembers are dead and drifting—unless the navy found the bodies or one of the rubberneckers thought a corpse would suffice as a souvenir. Somewhere out there, a bunch of TVs are switching over to news of the war, and how it's edging into sector seven right now, and which planet might fall next. Pretty much everywhere but here, six dead is old news. Nothing to see. Guess you've got to be pretty lonely to care about the loss of a handful of strangers.

And I suppose my view is shaped by the portholes around me. Six people probably died from slipping in their showers in the time it took me to have this thought right here of them slipping in their showers. But it's more than the deaths I saw; it's the *destruction*. The noise with which we go seems to make it count for more. I think of my buddies who checked out via hand grenade versus those who died from MRSA back in the VA. We barely notice the latter. They're statistics. Go quietly, and you're a number. Go in spectacular fashion, and you're a *name*.

I never wanted to be a name. I think of how I nearly went out, with the rest of my squad. I think of the people who want to make a movie out of that last stand. The publishers with their book deals. The ghostwriters who clamor to write of ghosts.

Everyone wants me to relive that. I just want to get lost. I asked for a post somewhere where no one would find me, where no one would know my name.

So they gave me a number. 23. My little beacon.

But then the bright flash came for me anyway, and a squad drifts dead in space, and the war is creeping closer.

I can't sleep at night.

And maybe that's a good thing.

• 2 •

An alarm is going off up in the command station, four flights away from the airlock wing. I've truly crawled into a hole. Now I climb out to see what in the world is beeping. With the walk suit on, the ladder is a bitch. I climb with one hand, my helmet in the other, which thumps up the rungs by my hip. This is me losing my shit. This is NASA's investment in me gone to waste.

I crawl through the power and life support pod, through my old living quarters, and up into what I like to think of as my office. One of the scanners is flashing. I'm lumbering that way when the QT beeps with a message. I decide to check that first, knowing it'll be a message from NASA, probably asking me to check whatever's beeping on the scanner. These little messages from Houston are the only company I have. The contact is nice. Too bad Houston is full of assholes and taskmasters. Maybe prisoners in isolation feel what I feel: they hate their guards, but a beating now and then is at least some human contact.

I check the readout. I am their trained monkey.

Picking up life sig

This seems so unlikely that I assume the station is still glitching from the reboot. A second message beeps through before I can even turn to check the scanner:

Check scanner

"I am," I say. "Jeez."

Sometimes I wish the QT weren't quite so instantaneous.

Letting out a sigh, I cross the command room to check the bio scanner. It's one of the more sensitive instruments on the beacon, and that's saying something. If lichen or viruses start collecting on the outside of the hull, the scanner sounds an alarm, like it's doing right now. I acknowledge the alarm to shut it off, but the light keeps flashing to let me know the reading is still active.

The eggheads in Houston joke that the bio scanner can hear a protein folding in the vacuum of space five hundred klicks away. They think that's funny, because sound doesn't travel through space. At least, I think that's the joke. NASA is weird about the things they fear. They get really nervous about unknown life forms, and yet it's all they talk about. They're like teenage boys with sex in this way.

I study the blip, wishing it would vanish. It's been a week since

the crash. Is there any chance one of the crew survived the impact in a stasis pod? Or did a load of produce just now break open when its case smashed into something else?

The signal is definitely out there amid the debris. And a solid target, not a dispersal blip like you might see if a container was leaking biofuels. Something is alive. Or the beacon's scanners are wrecked. I reckon the latter is more likely. I watch the blip and count to ten, waiting for whatever it is to die in the vacuum of space. If the thing were sealed in a suit or a ship, the scanner wouldn't pick up jack. Even with all the activity in the sector lately, the scanner has only gone off briefly, when someone pumps their shitter, and that's just for a flash.

Go away, I tell the blip. *I don't need you.*

…

I bite my nails. It's a habit I've mostly given up.

…

Mostly.

…

Damn. Okay. Back to the QT, where I type: *I see it. 32K*

In other words: Confirmed. And it's thirty-two klicks away, so can we please pretend it isn't there?

Check it

In other words, go out into the vacuum of space, see what's alive out there, and report back if it doesn't kill you first.

Fucking NASA. In a horror movie, when everyone is hugging their shins and shouting for the main character to turn and run, or crawl under the bed, or call the cops, or grab a gun, NASA would be the dude in the back shouting, "Go see what made that noise! And take a flashlight!"

• 3 •

At least I already have on the walk suit, and after a week of sleeping in it, the thing reeks of *my* sweat, not someone else's. It's this positive outlook on life that got me through three and a half tours of duty and the last six months of my first beacon stint. I'm a chipper guy, once you get to know the raw, dark dread and petrified fear that lurks in my breast and that I battle with every waking moment and that sometimes has me sobbing into my palms when no one is around and makes it really hard to be in crowds or to stand any loud sounds and has me thinking I'll probably never be in a functional relationship again, platonic or otherwise. Once you get that, you have to say to yourself, "Hey, why's this guy so damn happy all the time?"

I load a few supplies into the lifeboat (medkit, extra tank of O_2, all-in-one meal, jug of water) and make sure the sampling case is locked in its compartment. Running checks on the engines and life support reminds me of my piloting days, back before I got grounded and forced into infantry. Drunks are an asset on the front line, the army taught me. In the air, we're a nuisance.

As I'm warming the thrusters and wondering what's alive out there in the asteroid field, I find myself craving a laser pod or two under my wings. And then I have to remind myself that this rusting bucket doesn't even *have* wings. She's shaped like an outhouse—only doesn't smell as nice. She flies like crap, too, I am reminded, as I seal the hatch and decouple from the beacon. I maneuver with a wobble until I get a feel for the stick. Craning my neck, I look back at my little home in outer space, and the sight of her gives me vertigo.

I live in that?

The beacon is just an off-white can in an oil slick of black. Char marks and black spots dot the hull from micro impacts, and I can see a star through the new hole in the upper solar array. Flashing lights on the top and bottom of the beacon and out on the edges of the arrays signal a hazard to navigation to no one in particular. My sector is empty, save for the beacon. Even the bulk of the wreckage is gone, save for the curls of metal and tinsel of carbon fiber to show that anything happened here, like an intersection after a car crash with its scattering of glass and broken taillight covers.

I should get out more, I realize. The perspective feels good. NASA regs state that we should go for a walk once a week to inspect things, but I'm told no one does that. It's easier to sit with our heads against the GWB, enjoying the buzz and hoping nothing bad happens to stir us from our miserable comfort.

The multi-display on the dash flickers as I lose uplink with the

beacon for a moment. I slap the side of the unit, and the video returns to normal. I've got the beacon's bio scanner repeating to the display so I can track the blip. I keep waiting for it to disappear. I can feel my beacon operator down in Houston tracking all the telemetry and drumming his or her fingers on their desk, wishing I'd hurry up and get them more data. At the neighboring desk, an operator is probably dealing with beacon 512 and a pesky blackwater pump with a mind of its own. Next row down, someone is telling beacon 82 that their traffic lane is being diverted, and a tug will be out next week to relocate them. Suddenly, Houston is nothing more than a customer support call center, tending to the small emergencies across a fleet of expensive metal drums that dot the expanse of the cosmos. Heh. Maybe *we're* the taskmasters, not them.

The collision alarm sounds as a large asteroid tumbles and spins my way. It's a long way off, plenty of time to correct course, but as I do so, I can see why the alarm has given me so much notice: this tin can drives like a unicycle, and the lone wheel is that spinny one on the shopping cart with a mind of its own.

Around the back side of a small moon of a rock, about thirty klicks from the beacon, I get a lock on the bio source. It's just five hundred meters ahead, and it's drifting toward the beacon at a decent clip. Like it was coming for me. I reach to zoom the HUD for a visual and find my gloved hand pawing at empty space. There is no HUD. I'm not in my Falcon. Crazy how long little twinges of habit like this can last. I have to make do with leaning forward against my harness to strain with my eyes.

There.

Among the maze and jumble of rocks, an object with neat manmade lines and corners. Looks like a standard cargo container, the kind that gets loaded into the belly of short-hop atmo ships in those busy cargo spaceports above settled planets. She's painted bright green and has marks of impact across her side, along with writing in a few different languages.

I slow the lifeboat—little crystals forming from the forward jets of air—and unfold the articulating arm that tucks in under her nose. As I get closer, I see a constellation of objects drifting alongside the container—its contents, no doubt spilled after a collision with one of the many tumbling rocks. A toilet seat spins past. Dozens of them. Splinters of wooden crates. Gossamer moths of ladies' dresses, many still on hangers, oddly keeping their wrinkled shapes as they drift past.

I enter an asteroid field within an asteroid field. If the larger assemblage of rocks represents some proto-planet that never quite formed, then this is like a department store that never achieved

critical mass.

Turning the lifeboat toward the container, I flip on the forward spotlights, which barely pierce the dark interior of the metal box. I wonder, briefly, if I'm going to have to go in there. And it occurs to me that until someone licks AI, this is why NASA needs monkeys in space. To make stupid monkey decisions like these.

I check the multi-display again to see what the bio scanner is telling me. The signature looks different. More faint. I slap the screen and the entire image wavers, but the little red blip in the center remains a shadow of its former self. Whatever was alive out there won't be for much longer. And now that I'm here, so close to whatever it is, I feel the need to rescue it. I just wanted it to go away before. Now I want it to hold out a little bit longer.

I turn the ship from side to side and watch the blip. That helps to triangulate it, to make sure the source is coming from inside the container. A large plastic postal service bin tumbles past, spilling envelopes and small packages. There are more of the damn toilet seats. They clunk off the hull, but pose no threat. And the red blip slips to the side of the screen. Somehow, it has moved past me.

Turning the ship, I watch the screen until the blip is centered again. I peer at the spot and see only the small cluster of packages and mail items. So I won't be rescuing anyone. It was a silly fantasy anyway. What I'm probably tracking down is a batch of cookies from someone's grandmother, cookies that have now grown hairy with space-resistant mold. A letdown for me, though NASA goes bonkers for mold, so my operator will be thrilled.

A dozen meters from the assemblage, I unfold the articulating arm. I open my visor to see better and release my harness so I can lean forward and peer through the windshield. Using the arm, I gently wave back and forth through the trail of packages, knocking them on new trajectories. I keep glancing down at the screen to see when the blip moves. But when I see the object with my own eyes, I know. Somehow, I know. Through a torn cardboard package, I see a wooden box, bigger than a toaster, rich red like cherry, and gleaming with varnish.

It's not just the vivid beauty of the object, caught in the lifeboat's spotlights, nor the grain of wood—a sight for sore eyes. It's the way the box has broken open that makes me think the sign of life picked up by the sensors might be leaking from the ruptured package.

I pass through a haze of envelopes and bound packages. Reaching with the arm, I seize the box, and then I turn the lifeboat ninety degrees; the blip stays perfectly centered on the screen. This is the object that disrupted the reverie of my day. Its signal is faint and fading. I close my visor and pull the articulating arm back inside,

bringing whatever I've found into the safety and comfort of my atmosphere.

• 4 •

I wait to inspect the box in the airlock, back at the beacon. If there's any contamination, I can purge the airlock and decontaminate myself before entering the living space or removing my suit. I'm not hopeful though. The blip of life on my display was already fading fast when I brought the object inside. I'm starting to think someone's order for a pet frog or worms to go fishing with was cracked open when that container took a tumble.

I set the box down on the changing bench in the airlock and drop the medkit satchel on the floor. Rummaging through the medkit, I find the biogen scanner. There's a massive red warning stamped on it: "DO NOT REMOVE HELMET BEFORE USE." Which makes me think they should have the warning on the inside of our visor, not on the scanner. By the time you're reading this warning, you've already acted responsibly. I fumble with the infuriatingly little power switch on the scanner, wondering how many space monkeys have removed their thick gloves before operating this thing and how bad a job NASA does at creating and placing warnings.

It finally powers up. I wave the scanner over my suit, around my helmet, up and down my arms, then slowly bring it toward the box. I orbit the box twice. I can feel the scanner humming in my palm. An amber light flashes while it takes its readings, and then, finally, the light goes green.

Green means everything is okay. At least, I'm pretty sure that's what it means. Or does green mean, *Yes, we found something hazardous*? No, that wouldn't make any sense. I'm just second-guessing because this is scary shit, and I remind myself that if there was anything in the air that would react with my body, it would've reacted with the scanner. What I really want right now is a second scanner to scan *this* scanner. And maybe a third.

My hibernating little OCD self seems to be stirring. He only does this when he's pretty sure I'm about to die a horrible, grisly death. I saw a lot of this guy in the war. But during the last week, he's been that old college roommate who just drops in one day, crashes on the couch, and next thing you know he's living with you and leaving the milk out on the counter.

Ah, fuck it. I either die in the airlock breathing in some toxin being mailed to a politician, or I sit around until a large hunk of debris punches a hole in the wall, sucking out every bit of my atmosphere. I debate whether or not to hold my breath. Is the massive, wheezing inhalation that follows worse than all the small little puffing breaths I might take instead? (I often debated this when

a squad mate would lay a fart with a howl of laughter. Breathe normal? Or put it off and then risk sucking that fart so deep into your lungs that it stays there forever, little fart cells melding way inside the core of you?)

I go with the sipping breath technique, lips pursed, almost whistling as I breathe in little gasping bits of air. Trusting that damn scanner, I pop my visor. The breathing technique makes me a little dizzy. At least, I think it's the breathing. My OCD roommate is screaming in my skull, yelling, "Told you so!" and assuring me we're both about to die and that it's all my fault for not listening to him.

I pop my helmet and tug off my gloves. I breathe more normally, and the dizziness subsides. My roommate shrugs, munches on a cold slice of pizza, and turns back to the TV. I return my attention to the little box.

There's a pair of shears in the medkit for cutting gauze and snipping away walk suits. I use these to cut the cardboard box that's still partially concealing the gleaming wood. I'm careful not to destroy the label, as I'm sure NASA will want to know who the package was going to and where it was coming from. Glancing at the name, I see that it was heading to a university on Oxford. The initials are SAU. Never heard of it. But there are only a few thousand universities on Oxford, and I could probably name two. The recipient is a Prof. Allard Bockman. The sender's name was damaged by the impact, but I'm sure NASA will be able to track the barcode.

I set the cardboard aside and study the box, which is gorgeous even in its damaged state. An ornate pattern carved around the perimeter looks like a chain of links, all intertwined. It's imperfect enough for me to imagine it was done by hand, but it's precise enough that I recognize the talent and care put into it. Or maybe a machine made it with just enough variation to fool me into thinking it was done by hand. You never know what's real these days. How do cynics find joy in even the simplest of things anymore?

The first thing I inspect is the damage. I probe the destroyed corner with my thumb; there are jagged splinters everywhere. It occurs to me, suddenly—my roommate drops his slice of pie and jumps from the couch in alarm—that the hole may have been created from within, rather than punched from without. Maybe something escaped!

I set the box down and take a step back, nearly tripping over my helmet. The sight of one of my gloves out of the corner of my eye looks like a giant white spider for a moment. I shriek. I remember the fear I used to feel in the army from seeing a sword-leech in my bunk—and then the much greater fear from *no longer seeing the sword-leech in my bunk*—and electricity rushes up my spine.

There's an itch by my knee.

And something moving along my hip and up my ribs.

I claw at the suit I haven't taken off for a week, trying to remember where the buckles and zippers and snaps are. Working my arms and legs free, I realize the itching is probably from having the damn thing on for a week, and that I've been itching constantly for days. And that the only thing likely to kill me in that suit is the damn stench.

Naked and sweating, breathing hard, a hundred thousand dollars' worth of NASA garb inside out and scattered like a tux on a wedding night, I try to remember a guy who used to pick up a rifle and run toward a legion of Ryph with balls of plasma blooming on either side of him, eruptions of dirt, dogfights in the atmo, and kinetic missiles zipping down from orbit.

Who is this limp-dick, shell-shocked, mamby-wamby space monkey I've become?

Was this me before boot camp?

This was me back in high school. The real me. What the hell did the army do to me?

That's when I hear the scratching noise. Coming from the box sitting on the airlock bench.

And a small voice that does not seem to be coming from inside my head.

• 5 •

Picking up the box, that mirror finish of wood with the hole blown out, I turn it to find the clasp, and again I hear something move inside. I feel the clunk of something heavy hitting one wall of the box. I feel it vibrate slightly in my hand.

The clasp is really a series of four wood pegs, each bigger around than my finger. I push them in one at a time, and when I push the fourth, it causes the first three to slide back out flush with the box. I push the first three in again, but the lid won't open. I reset them. Try the first two. Reset. The first and third. Reset. The middle two. Reset. Just the first. Reset. Just the second. And the lid pops open.

The thing inside shifts again. And then I hear someone say:

"Jesus Christ on a popsicle stick, took your goddamn time."

There is a rock inside the box.

I look at the rock.

I feel like the rock is looking at me.

The rock shifts position ever so slightly.

"What?" it asks.

"Hello?" I say.

"Yeah, hello, what the hell took you so long? I was dying in here."

"You're… a rock," I tell the rock.

"The fuck I am."

I set the box back on the bench and rest on my heels, peering at the little thing. It's gray with deep pockets of black, little fissures and cracks and pockmarks. One of the black spots is deep and might be an… eye? I've gone through countless flashcards of alien life for the army and NASA, and I've forgotten most of what I had to memorize to get through the tests, but I know there are shitloads of creatures that camouflage themselves either to not get stepped on or to kill the fuck out of those of us who step too close to them. Yet I've never seen a creature that looks so much like… a rock.

"What are you?" I ask.

"Well, since you're obviously a human, you'd call me an Orvid. And since your accent places you from Earth, you'd obviously not give a fuck what I call myself in my own tongue, so why bother?"

"You're a foul-mouthed thing," I say.

"This is me shrugging like I give a shit," the rock tells me.

"This is weird," I say out loud, mostly to myself, but I guess partly to the rock. "I mean, a lot of my life has been really freaking kooky and batshit crazy, but this is fascinatingly weird."

"Yeah, no shit. I'm on my way to a happy life in Oxford, and next

thing I know I can't breathe and some fruitloop is shrieking and shaking my happy little wooden home and giving me hell for my vocabulary. Jesus, man, I almost just died, and you're thinking about yourself? What kind of special selfish *are* you?"

This brings me up short. My brain is still whirling with the idea that this rock-looking alien is actually alive, so I haven't considered the fact that a clearly sentient being very nearly just died, and here I am worried about my own feelings.

"Damn," I say. "Sorry. Totally. Are you okay? You need… like little pebbles to munch on or something?" I laugh.

"Fuck you," the rock says. "What I need is some water."

•••

This is me, in a beacon, out on the edge of sector eight, so damn near the edge that I might as well be in sector nine, running the tap on my moisture reclaiminator, filling a plastic cup with water, then drizzling it on top of a rock in a smashed wooden box.

"Not on my fucking head!" the rock says.

I apologize but laugh. The rock has what sounds vaguely like a British accent, which makes everything it says funnier than it should.

"Sorry," I say.

"Just a little puddle, man. And save me some time by putting me in it."

I do this. It occurs to me that I haven't called this in or checked with NASA about what I found. I go over to the QT to see if there are any messages. Nothing. That's pretty damn curious. So I fire off a quick "55" to Houston, which is beacon code for "Everything here is hunky-dory, in case you were wondering."

"Where are we?" the rock asks. And I realize that I need a name for the guy. And how really fucking cool it is to have some company other than my freaked-out OCD roommate.

"Beacon 23," I say. "Sector eight. On the outer edge of the Iain Banks asteroid field, between the ore rim and—"

"Yeah, jeez, okay. The middle of nowhere, I get it. So when's the next pickup?"

"The next what?"

"WHEN DO I GET HOME?" the rock shouts. It sounds like a little squeal more than a great roar, like a piece of chalk on a blackboard.

"The, uh, next supply shuttle will be in… I think three months?"

The rock stares at me.

Did he just shrug?

He looks exasperated.

A bubble forms on the surface of his little puddle.

I wonder if rocks can fart.

“I need to name you,” I tell the rock.

“The hell you do.”

“I’m thinking…”

“Already got a name,” the rock says.

“…oh, but that’s too obvious.” I laugh. I laugh hard. It’s the first time I’ve laughed in so long that all my emotional triggers, which have only known sobbing, mix some tears in with the laughter.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” the rock says.

“I’m going to call you…”

“I’VE GOT A NAME!”

“…Rocky.”

Rocky stares at me. It’s more of a glare, really. I start laughing again. Damn, it feels good.

“You’re the worst human I’ve ever met,” Rocky says.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks. “I think maybe when the supply shuttle comes, I’ll just keep you. Not tell the labcoats about you.”

“That’s called kidnapping, you sadistic ape.”

This makes me laugh some more. It’s the accent. It kills me.

“Are you stoned?” Rocky asks.

And this is too much. I double over and clutch my shins, there in the command pod, not a stitch of clothing on, laughing and crying and wheezing for breath, fearing I might not be able to stop, that I’ll die like this, die from so much joy and mirth, while debris from a destroyed cargo ship peppers the hull and cracks into the solar array, and ships full of people navigate through space at twenty times the speed of light, narrowly avoiding this great reef of drifting rocks, and all because I’m here, because I’m holding it together, this trained and hairless monkey in outer space.

• 6 •

Rocky and I sit up in the business end of the beacon, past the weightless tube that extends off to the side for a dozen meters, up where the GWB broadcasts all the local gravitational disturbances to ships traveling through hyperspace. My head rests against the broadcasting dome, which makes me feel like a warm hand is cradling my skull, soothing me down to my toes.

"Tell me about your homeworld," I say to Rocky. His box is positioned so he can gaze out the main porthole with me, at the stars and the wreck of debris he miraculously survived.

There's a pause. A wistful pause.

"It's beautiful," he says. And then: "You're from Earth, right?"

"Yeah," I tell him. "Until I was ten. Then moved to Orion with my dad. Then Ajax for a few months. Then New India. I was an army brat."

"Okay, okay, I didn't ask for your entire life history," Rocky says. "Well, imagine Earth, but nothing like that."

I laugh. "Gotcha."

We sit in silence for a long while. It feels good up here. Even better with the company. I could do another four years. I could re-up. I remember feeling this way in the army, the days that were really good, when you'd survived the bad shit and felt kinda invincible and actually, deeply happy, but maybe in an unhealthy and manic kinda way, and how those were the days when you went to your CO and saluted and shouted, in your best boot camp voice, "Sign me up for another tour, SUR!" And how later, when the high wore off, and you came down from the survivor's rush, and your mood went back to normal, you were like, "What the fuck did I just do?"

I felt that kind of good right then.

After a while, Rocky starts telling me about his home planet. I listen while I gaze out at the stars and the twinkle of aluminum tinsel.

"Your race named my planet Orvo when you found it. After the name of a physician on one of the scout ships. I think he'd died the week before or something. Anyway, you probably assume that my planet and my name sound like some gibberish series of clicks and scratchy noises, and while that's really fucking xenophobic, you'd be right."

Rocky makes a series of clicks and scratchy noises. I smile. Life is really good.

"We don't have a moon, and our sun is a very long way away. What heat we have comes from a radioactive core, and there's very little tectonic activity, which makes for an incredibly still planet,

covered with a few meters of water in most places, except for these really shallow ledges and flat islands where most of the cool stuff takes place. That was home."

"So, not space-faring, I assume?" I say.

"Yeah, asshole, not space-faring."

"But sentient."

"Smarter than you."

I smile. "And your anatomy? I assume something like neurons?"

"Not quite as simple as neurons, but similar. And yeah, we're very social. So we developed sentience. Theory of mind and all that."

"What's theory of mind?" I ask.

Rocky pauses. Like he's wondering if teaching a monkey is within his boundaries of patience.

"It's me being able to guess what you're thinking," he says.

My brain is already drifting off to a different topic. "What do you call a small group of your kind?" I ask.

"Say what?"

"Well, a group of cows is a herd. What's a group of rocks. A bag?"

"A bag of rocks?" Rocky asks.

I laugh.

"Fuck you."

"Rocky, you're the best friend I've ever had."

"That settles it. I used to argue with the professor that there was no such thing as hell. I was wrong. I relent. I give up. I've found the joint."

"Where did you learn English?" I ask. "And who did you used to argue about heaven and hell with? This professor?"

"We didn't argue. We *debated*. We *discussed*. It's what civilized people do. You should try it sometime."

"Okay." I feel a little more sober. And for some reason, I don't mind. I sit up, away from the GWB for a moment. "Tell me about your owner—"

"I own me," Rocky says.

"Yeah, sorry." I shake my head. "About this professor you were being sent to. On Oxford."

"I'm his research assistant," Rocky says. "I just finished my internship on Delphi, was heading home. I work with Professor Bockman on human studies and consciousness."

"So you're a biologist?" I ask, and a new level of stunned hits me, followed by a wave of obviousness. Of course this thing has a job. This *being*, not thing. So many layers of biases and assumptions to peel away. Just when I think I'm almost there—

"Not a biologist," Rocky says. "I've been studying under Professor Bockman for three years. He's a philosopher."

Something clicks.
Something funny.
“Wait,” I say.
“Don’t—” Rocky warns.
“Are you telling me—?”
“Ah, hell,” Rocky says.
“You’re a philosopher’s stone?”

•••

It takes a solid minute or two to stop laughing. Lying on my side, curled up in a ball, I finally get my breath back and just stay there, gazing out at the stars, feeling contentment for the first time in… possibly forever. I think about the passenger liner that skated through unharmed, probably safe by no more than a few seconds of desperate struggle on my part, and how no one has asked me about that. How not a single labcoat asked me how that felt. How I sat right here, exhausted and crying, but feeling something like elation, like whatever the highest form of relief in the world is, that feeling after a bomb misses its target and you’ve still got all your fingers and toes, but that feeling times five thousand.

“The army really fucked you up good, didn’t it?” Rocky asks.

I don’t answer. Instead the world goes blurry with tears.

“I’m sorry for that,” Rocky tells me, and I can hear that he’s sincere, and this starts the sobbing. I haven’t cried in front of anyone in the longest time. Not since that one session with that army shrink, which made me never want to sit in therapy again. But now I cry my fucking guts out, and it goes on forever, and Rocky doesn’t say anything, doesn’t judge me, just sits in his box where I can’t see him, and I know that he’s smarter than me, and wiser, and it’s not just the accent, but all that schooling, and that he somehow gets that I’m fucked up but that it isn’t my fault, and this feels really fucking amazing, to have someone think it’s not all my fault, and so I cry and cry while little pebbles and bits of steel bounce off my beacon and go tumbling like shed tears out into the cosmos.

When I finally pull it together, Rocky asks me a question, one that stuns me into a long and thoughtful silence:

“What hurt you?”

This causes me to suck in a big gulp of air. I’d cry more if I hadn’t just cried myself out.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Maybe you do,” Rocky suggests, “but you’re scared to give it life.”

I laugh. “You sound like my shrink.”

“Yeah, well, fuck me, maybe I’m starting to care about you a little bit, and maybe he cared about you. I mean, I’m relying on you to water me, right? And I’m really hoping to hell you tell the supply ship about me and get me home, so it behooves me to be nice to you.”

“You said behooves,” I say.

“Is this how you avoid thinking about it? Whatever it was?”

I sit up. I move across the space between the GWB and the outer wall of the pod and sit with my back to the porthole, looking at the dome and the smaller panes of glass that ring the small space.

“I used to be a pilot,” I say.

I take a deep breath, wondering where the hell I’m going with this.

“I saw a lot of action in the Void War. We were… a bunch of people dying out in the middle of nowhere, you know? Not even a rock to claim. Nothing but lines on a star chart. Just pointless. Only made sense if you were drunk, you know? Like… how the deck of a ship seems to come to rest with a few rums, like it all balances out if you get the mixture just right, if the world is as tilted as you are.”

Rocky listens. Is really listening.

“Anyway, I lost my wings and got moved to the front. I was there for the Blitz, when we were going to end the war, be home by Christmas, all that bullshit. I was in my third tour with the army. Was a lieutenant in an A-squad, which is the people you call when no one else will pick up the goddamn phone, and really, I just kept getting promoted through attrition. Everyone above me got blown to bits, and they kept slotting me up, and no one cared that my breath could strip the camo paint from a field blaster, they just cared that we killed more than we lost, which we did in spades.”

My mind drifts back to that last day. My last day fighting. The day I refused to fight anymore. And my hand settles on the wound across my belly.

“I could’ve killed a shitload of ’em that day,” I say. “I guess I already had, but I could’ve taken out a hive, an entire nest of hives, and turned the tide. Would’ve meant wiping out three of our own platoons, and I’d already lost every man in my squad, but taking the whole place out was the right thing to do. And yet I didn’t. Then it turned out for the best. The Ryph pulled back because of my squad’s push right up into the swarm—and yeah, it was my squad that did all the hero-ing that day, and because I’m the one who woke up in a hospital, who didn’t die out there, my guts sewn back into my belly, they pinned a medal on me, and there were a bunch of parades that I saw from my hospital bed, and I still don’t know why the hell anyone cared that two armies decided they’d kill each other tomorrow instead

of that afternoon, and I never asked.

"My CO's CO's CO came to me with all his gold stars on his collar and asked me what I wanted to do with the rest of my career, to name my posting."

I pause and think back to that day. To that old man. His beaming face. The pride he had in the injured soldier his army had made.

"And what did you ask for?" Rocky said.

"I told him I wanted to be alone."

I remember the old man's smile fading, how the scars across his lips came back together, which let me know that he hadn't been smiling when whatever caused those scars happened to him. He walked away, but he granted me my wish.

"NASA is where the best of the best pilots end up," I tell Rocky. "The very best fliers, with all their shit together, they end up in NASA. It's always been like that. Until me."

We sit in silence a while.

"I think you're doing just fine," Rocky says. "You rescued me, right?"

I lean forward and put my face in my palms. I don't say it, but I'm thinking it, wondering who rescued whom.

It feels good, talking about this stuff. Not for the first time, I regret that I didn't continue on with the shrink. I just wasn't ready. Was too scared to face myself. It was too early to be seen.

"Hey, Rocky?"

I lift my head from my palms. Scoot over toward the box. Rocky is sitting in his little puddle, which looks about the same size as when I first made it.

"Rock?"

He looks up at me, I guess wondering what I'm about to say.

I toy with one of the splinters from his box, bending it back and forth until it comes free. Bringing it up to my nose, I breathe in the scent of wood, admire how moist and green and fresh the wood is, like it just came out of the forest, this thing that was so recently alive. It smells like my childhood on Earth. It smells like the outdoors. Like crisp air and atmosphere.

Rocky has fallen silent. I think I know why.

"You made this hole, didn't you?" I ask him.

He stares at me guiltily.

"You're like… like a bullet in an abdomen."

Rocky looks slightly away.

"You hurt this box, and it was still a little bit alive out there, and it was going to Professor Bockman at SAU on Oxford, and it was empty, just a box, and the wood died the rest of the way out there, didn't it?"

Rocky says nothing.

"I'm losing my fucking mind, aren't I?"

I think Rocky nods. I wish he would say something. I wish he would talk to me. Illusions are easy to form, but they're impossible to put back together. They're like humans in that way. It's so hard to know if a thing is alive or dead. So hard. I smell that splinter of wood again, which still smells vaguely of the living, and I don't know why, but my mind drifts to Alice Waters, whom I loved in high school, and who I used to write in the army because I didn't know who else to write, and I wonder what she thought of all those batshit letters I sent, and if those letters smelled of someone who was alive and breathing and scared out of his fucking mind, or if maybe they just smelled of crazy and desperate and blood and thermite. Or if, like me, those old love letters just reeked to her of war.